

# ANGUS

## BEEF BULLETIN®

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

Volume 27, Number 3 • March 2011



### On the Edge of Controversy, Part II:



# Unintended Consequences

*Rural Idaho, its citizens and wildlife continue to bear the brunt of a robust, unmanaged wolf population.*

Story by  
**KIM HOLT**

Picture big, remote country with high-mountain lakes and rugged canyons with pristine streams and secluded hot springs. That's the country in which Dave Melton

and his crew outfit and guide as part of Melton's family-owned Bighorn Outfitters. Melton's base is east-central Idaho, just north of the rural community of Salmon, the birthplace of Sacajawea on the Lewis and Clark trail.

The 275-square-mile area in which

Melton is permitted to guide hunters and fishermen requires horseback or plane to reach the Middle Fork of Salmon River Country — an avid outdoorsman's dream.

Melton worked for Bighorn Outfitters before buying the business in 1992. He offers the public remote big-game hunts as the only licensed outfitter within the Bighorn Crags area of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, the largest federally protected forest wilderness in the lower 48 states.

The Bighorn Crags are considered some of Idaho's most rugged terrain. Melton and his guides spend three-quarters of their year in these mountains, so they know the terrain and wildlife well. While Melton would like to say the gray wolf is not affecting his business, he and other hunt outfitting businesses know the truth too well.

"My bills have stayed the same, but my revenue has gone down," Melton says. "So that's pretty obvious what's happening there."

### Ungulates, outfitters dealt challenges

In 1994, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) proposed designating portions of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming as "nonessential experimental" wolf population areas for the gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In 1995 and 1996, 66 of these Canadian wolves were released into central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park.

The recovery goal, 10 breeding pairs and 100 wolves in three separate recovery areas for a period of three years, was reached in 2002, and the USFWS delisted the gray wolf population from the ESA in 2008. However, a lawsuit by environmental groups that challenged the Service's delisting put the wolf back on the ESA list in August 2010 and halted a second wolf hunting season in both Idaho and Montana.

Idaho's wolf population continues to grow and expand and is now eight times the minimum federal recovery level, which many say is a very conservative estimate. The effects of wolf predation are affecting Idaho's ungulate herds, including elk and moose, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game's (IDFG) revenues, family businesses such as outfitters and guides, ranchers and shepherders, and service businesses in communities that support the business aspect of hunting.

Melton himself outfits in one of the most saturated land and river outfitter areas

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## Unintended Consequences *(from cover)*

in the state. While some hunting outfitters have closed up shop, his business has fallen off slowly, causing him to drop hunts. While there are still elk, there aren't as many as before, he says.

"All in all, every outfitter here has taken fewer hunters, so it's affected our businesses pretty big," he says. "I've gotten to the point on a few of my camps where I don't even hunt the country anymore, because it's not worth it for me to go out there and find nothing."

This isn't true of all his country, though.

"Some of the areas I hunt are very highly impacted and some of them are good," he explains. "You just don't know from year to year where that's going to be."

Even though different big-game species are hunted, he explains, "Elk is everyone's bread and butter here in Idaho." The state is renowned for its herds of elk and uncrowded great mountain adventures.

"In our deal you don't scout because your camps might be 25 miles in," he says, "and that's by horseback. Right now I'm booking for this fall. I don't know what's happening back there. So, I have to book and have good faith that I'm going to go back there and find animals."

Melton confirms that he's seen changes in elk patterns and numbers from pre-wolf days to present and so do his clients, many of whom are repeat guests. He describes, "Before, elk were pretty much widespread anywhere you went, especially in the Middle Fork. Of course, weather plays a role. You'd have slow days, but overall you'd see elk and knew they were there by tracks and signs." He says one was always guaranteed to see elk in big meadows.

This isn't the case anymore; there are still elk, but it requires more work to find them. Melton believes it's because the elk have gotten smarter in order to survive. Wolves like elk, he says, because they're big targets and will run.

"I've told many people — the one thing you need to remember now is every elk that's alive on the ground in Idaho has dealt with wolves their whole lives," Melton says.

While elk hunting has changed and become more



PHOTO COURTESY IDAHO OUTFITTERS AND GUIDES ASSOCIATION

In its February newsletter, Idaho Fish & Game (IDFG) recognizes that elk hunting in Idaho has changed but is still a good bet for hunters. IDFG reports the herd has declined some 22,000 head since its peak of 125,000 in the mid-1990s, but deer and elk are meeting management objectives in most parts of the state.

challenging in Idaho, it's of no help that the state is receiving poor hunting press about its wolves, which makes outfitters like Melton have to work harder to book clients.

It has also affected elk and deer resident and non-resident tag revenue for IDFG, which reports that tag sales for both declined the past three years. That means fewer hunters, harvests and less revenue for the state.

"Everybody's affected by this," Melton points out. "IDFG is affected, we're affected, everybody."

However, he believes, "Bad press will hurt you in the short go, but it's good in the long run because everybody needs to be educated. You can't fix a problem if people aren't aware it exists."

IDFG monitors its elk herd closely and reports numbers have declined to an estimated 103,000 as of last spring. In the mid-1990s, Idaho's elk numbers peaked at about 125,000.

Groups like the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association are concerned that wolf predation has and continues to have a substantial

adverse effect on elk populations in certain areas, particularly in northern and central Idaho; they're also concerned about the state's moose population.

*(Continued on page 4)*



Challis is one rural community that's feeling the effects of how elk hunting has changed in Idaho since wolf populations have increased, redistributing elk and challenging hunters to rethink their historical hunting patterns. Western states congressmen and senators have recently introduced legislation into the 112th Congress to amend the Endangered Species Act to exclude the gray wolf and to turn wolf management authority back to the states.

### Family-run outfitting businesses feel effects

In Boise, Grant Simonds is the executive director of the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association. He uses these numbers to illustrate the burden wolves are helping place on Idaho's hunt outfitting industry: Before re-introduction, in 1990, Idaho outfitters enjoyed a thriving base of 4,902 hunting clients. That number has decreased to 1,161 clients in 2009 — a 320% drop, he stresses.

"Is it all related to wolf depredation? No, we can't verify that — nobody can verify that," he says. "The bottom line is our outfitters know darn well what has led to a decrease in the number of outfitters and hunters in the state of Idaho."

Simonds explains there are about 150 licensed hunt outfitting businesses in Idaho, and, like ranches, most are family-run. Each is assigned specific operating areas within the state by the Idaho Outfitters and Guide Licensing Board.

"So you just can't pick up and move your hunting operation because wolves have come in and moved elk out of your operating area," he explains.

"For our industry, which relies on repeat customers, if you can't show a hunter an elk during their week's vacation here in Idaho, your repeat customers are going to diminish. And that's exactly what's happened since 1995."

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## Unintended Consequences *(from page 2)*

### Ranchers see, feel effects

Some 30 miles south of Melton, near Lemhi, Dean Shiner ranches with his brother, Stephen. Their business, Shiner Ranches Inc., is a commercial cow-calf operation that utilizes an all-Angus bull battery and AngusSource®.

As the crow flies, the Shiner operation is about 40 miles from where wolves in Idaho were first re-introduced. Like Melton, Shiner, who is a lifelong resident of Lemhi County, has also seen a change in wildlife patterns and believes the elk, especially, are exposed to constant wolf pressure.

Shiner confirms that they no longer find elk in places where they've notoriously wintered for years and years. And instead of wintering on nearby side hills as before, elk have moved to lower country, closer to people.

"The elk have moved down amongst people to try to save themselves," he says.

This ranch's cattle haven't been immune to the wolf's effects, either. Their first wolf encounters were about six years ago. Since then, they have lost about 13 head, mostly newborn calves, to this predator. The Shiners hadn't had predator problems before, even though they live at 5,200 feet and cattle graze up to 9,000 feet on summer ranges.

"Without snow or mud, it's pretty hard to say you have them," Shiner explains. It was actually fresh tracks in snow that pinpointed their wolves.

"The baby calves they'd kill, they'd just tear them apart and blood would be all over. And there'd be nothing left," he shares. "You might

find a piece of bone here and there. But that'd be all you'd find, other than a huge bloodspot."

Shiner confirms what other ranchers' experiences have shown: You rarely see a wolf, even if they've stirred up cows and calves. They're cagey, elusive predators.

"This time of year, calving, you'll never

see them. They'll do everything at night," Shiner says. "Once in a while you'll go riding, and you don't know what's happened. On some days, the cows are more aggressive toward the dogs than on other days." It's Shiner's belief that when this happens, wolves have recently passed through or harassed the herd.

"There's a reason why the old-timers got rid of the wolves," he says. "They didn't get rid of the bears, foxes, coyotes or cougars. But they got rid of the wolves, and there is a reason why."

### Rural communities affected

In central Idaho's Custer County, hunters annually return to hunt elk on the vast and varied public lands within reach from rural Challis, about an hour south of Salmon. In fact, the Village Inn Motel and Restaurant has hosted some of the same hunters for more than 20 years.

When Laurie and Derris Anderson bought this business three years ago, Laurie says the previous owners bragged they had hunting guests who came back year after year.

"That was the big thing. They said they did so well with the hunters," she recalls. "We saw that the first year. But the last three seasons it's been declining each year. We've had people who were here three years ago say they'd been coming here for 20 years from back east. They stayed a couple days, packed up and went to a different area to hunt. Others have said, 'it's not like the good

ole' days; we won't be coming back.' And they're blaming it on the wolves."

This drop in hunting guests has "definitely" affected this family's revenue, she says. During the three-month hunting season, Laurie estimates it has affected 20% of their income, plus affected other Challis businesses that rely on hunting, tourism and steelhead fishermen to help support this remote community of 1,000 on the scenic east fork of the Salmon River.

### Management is needed

Further west, in Idaho's southwest corner, Mitch Sanchotena owns Imperial Taxidermy in Caldwell. He has preserved hunting memories for outdoorsmen for more than 40 years, and is well-plugged in to an issue that also affects his livelihood.

"We should never have reintroduced wolves back into this so-called greater Yellowstone ecosystem," Sanchotena states bluntly. "Our forefathers were not completely stupid when they eradicated them the first time."

He continues, "Now that they're here, my heartache and heartburn is not particularly with the wolf itself; it's with the lack of management of the wolf."

If the wolves were kept on a really tight management plan, he says, this animal could be an economic asset to his business. "When we had the hunting season a year ago, we took in seven wolves to be mounted.

"We as sportsmen will probably view the wolf in a trophy capacity, just as we do the mountain lion and the black bear. So it's not per se the wolf; the problem is not only a lack of management, but no management. And no management, whether it's land-use or wildlife activities, is a course for a train wreck.

"I don't know what it's going to take to get an adequate management plan in place on the wolves, but it has to happen, and it has to happen quickly," he says.

It's difficult for Sanchotena to quantify just how many elk the wolves take out of his business. Since about 2003-2004, he's seen a fairly significant downward trend of elk coming into his studio. In years past, Imperial used to mount 30-35 elk a year; this past year he took in 16.

Conservatively, he says, if 10 hunters who would have mounted a bull elk did not find one, and it was attributable to wolves, that's \$10,000. But it's not just all about elk.

"Subsequently, our cougar business is suffering as dramatically as our elk," Sanchotena shares. More and more he's finding hunters who are unwilling to hunt cougars because of the wolf kill on their hounds, good ones often worth \$7,500-

*(Continued on page 6)*

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**The Shiner's first wolf encounters were about six years ago. Since then, they have lost about 13 head, mostly newborn calves.**

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Idaho outfitters have seen a 320% drop in hunting clients from 1990 — pre-wolf — to 2009. Grant Simonds, executive director of the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association, says its member-businesses have been hurt, as has the overall Idaho rural economy that relies upon income from resident and non-resident hunters.



PHOTO COURTESY BIGHORN OUTFITTERS INC.

## Unintended Consequences

(from page 4)

\$10,000. He conservatively figures he's lost 10 cougars statewide, or \$30,000.

Collectively this predator has cost his studio last year, alone, \$40,000 — a figure Sanchotena says isn't probably too far off based on trends over the past 15 years.

"It's an economic hardship on businesses like mine, the outfitters, ranchers, hotel owners in these small rural communities," he says. "In a lot of these little communities like Challis, the difference between businesses being able to make their payments or not is whether they have a hunting season and have hunters coming into town."

He also points to the revenue loss for larger communities like Boise when fewer non-resident hunters travel into Idaho.

"It's just a bad deal, and I don't have the answers," he says. "But I know the government, both state and federal, has to get a handle on them, and quickly."

"Too much of one thing is not good," Melton adds. "I don't mind wolves being around. I just don't want them to take everything over. They have too much protection, and there's zero control."

"Anything's acceptable as long as they [federal government] are doing something. But doing nothing is not acceptable. All you're doing is killing more game, more cattle," he says. "The wolf is kind of like a welfare animal — it gets stuff for nothing and doesn't have to do anything."



### Western states congressmen, senators introduce legislation

Hoping to succeed with a legislative fix in the 112th Congress, H.R. 509 and S. 249 have been introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives and U.S. Senate, respectively, to amend the Endangered Species Act so that it doesn't apply to the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*). H.R. 509, sponsored by Montana Congressman Denny Rehberg, a rancher from Billings, is co-sponsored by 18 U.S. representatives; S. 249 has eight co-sponsors.

Rehberg, joined by Idaho Congressmen Mike Simpson and Raul Labrador, has also introduced H.R. 510, the Idaho and Montana Wolf Management Act of 2011, aimed at returning wolf management authority to the states once and for all.

As of press time, both H.R. 509 and H.R. 510 had been referred to the House Committee on Natural Resources. S. 249 had been read twice and referred to the Committee on Environment and Public Works. To follow these bills, log onto [www.thomas.gov](http://www.thomas.gov).